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Today's front page

Thursday, March 21, 2005 - Page updated at 12:09 a.m.

Does Seattle group "teach controversy" or contribute to it?

By Linda Shaw
Seattle Times staff reporter

Three years ago, the Ohio Board of Education invited a small but influential Seattle think tank to debate the way evolution is taught in Ohio schools.

It was an opportunity for the Discovery Institute to promote its notion of intelligent design, the controversial idea that parts of life are so complex, they must have been designed by some intelligent agent.

Instead, leaders of the institute's Center for Science and Culture decided on what they consider a compromise. Forget intelligent design, they argued, with its theological implications. Just require teachers to discuss evidence that refutes Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, as well as what supports it.

They called it "teach the controversy," and that's become the institute's rallying cry as a leader in the latest efforts to raise doubts about Darwin in school. Evolution controversies are brewing in eight school districts, half a dozen state legislatures, and three state boards of education, including the one in Kansas, which wrestled with the issue in 1999 as well.

"Why fight when you can have a fun discussion?" asks Stephen Meyer, director of the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, which endorses "teaching the controversy" over evolution theories.



THOMAS JAMES HORST / THE SEATTLE TIMES

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Stephen Meyer of the Center for Science and Culture

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fight" over the separation of church and state, yet also avoids teaching Darwin's theories as dogma.

But what the center calls a compromise, most scientists call a creationist agenda that's couched in the language of science.

There is no significant controversy to teach, they say.

"You're lying to students if you tell them that scientists are debating whether evolution took place," said Eugene Scott, director of the National Center for Science Education, a nonprofit group that defends teaching of evolution in school.

The Discovery Institute, she said, is leading a public-relations campaign, not a scientific endeavor.

The Discovery Institute is one of the leading organizations working nationally to change how evolution is taught. It works as an adviser, resource and sometimes a critic with those who have similar views.

"There are a hundred ways to get this wrong," says Meyer. "And only a few to get them right."

* Ohio got it right, he says, when its state Board of Education voted in 2002 to require students to learn that scientists "continue to investigate and critically analyze aspects of evolutionary theory."

Scott says it was a small victory at most for intelligent-design supporters, but Meyer considers it a significant one — a model other states should follow. Minnesota has adopted similar language.

* The School Board in Dover, Pa., however, got it wrong, Meyer said, when it required instruction in intelligent design. (The matter is now in court.) Intelligent design isn't established enough yet for that, Meyer says.

He also criticizes the Georgia school board that put stickers on biology textbooks with a surgeon-general-like warning that evolution is "a theory not a fact." The stickers were a "dumb idea," he says bluntly. (A Georgia court ruled they were illegal, and the case is under appeal.)

In Wisconsin, the institute hopes it helped the School Board in the small town of Grantsburg switch to a teach-the-controversy approach.

In each place, the institute says it responds to requests for help, although it's working to become more proactive, too. Some critics suspect the ties are even closer.

Center's beginnings

The Center for Science and Culture opened in 1998 as a part of the already-established Discovery Institute, which also studies more earthbound topics such as transportation,

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economics, technology, bioethics. Founder Bruce Chapman — who has worked as an official in the Reagan administration, head of the U.S. Census Bureau and Washington's secretary of state — became interested in intelligent design after reading a piece Meyer wrote for The Wall Street Journal.

Meyer, then a philosophy professor at Whitworth College in Spokane, was defending a California professor in trouble for talking about intelligent design in biology class. To Chapman, it was an issue of academic freedom. He invited Meyer to come speak at the institute. The more they talked, the more Chapman and others at the institute became interested in offering a home to Meyer and others interested in intelligent design.

Intelligent design appealed to their view that life isn't really as unplanned or unguided as Darwin's theories can make it seem.

"It interested me because it seemed so different than the reductionist science that came out of the 19th century ... that everything could be reduced to chemistry," said John West, a political scientist and center associate director.

The private institute has an annual budget of about \$3.2 million, and plans to spend about \$1.3 million on the intelligent-design work, Chapman says, mostly to support the work of about three dozen fellows. The Fieldstead Charitable Trust, run by Christian conservative Henry Almanson and his wife, is one of the largest donors to that effort. Chapman declines to name more.

Meyer, the center's director, is a tall, friendly man who has undergraduate degrees in geology and physics and a Ph.D. in the philosophy of science from Cambridge, where he wrote his doctorate on the origins of life.

He says he's no creationist. He doesn't, for example, believe in a literal reading of the Bible, which would mean the Earth is about 6,000 years old.

He doesn't dispute that natural selection played a role in evolution, he just doesn't think it explains everything.

He often points to the Cambrian Period, a time more than 500 million years ago when most of the major groups of animals first appear in the fossil record. Meyer and other Discovery Institute fellows say those groups show up too fast, geologically speaking, to have come about through natural selection. That's one of what they see as controversies they want taught in school.

Scientists, however, say the Cambrian Period may not be completely understood, but that doesn't mean the theory of evolution is in trouble.

"They harp and harp on natural selection, as if natural selection is the only thing that evolutionary biologists deal with," says Scott. "Who knows whether natural selection explains the Cambrian body plans. ... So what?"

Scientists consider Meyer a creationist because

he maintains that some unnamed intelligence — and Meyer says he personally thinks it is God — has an active hand in creating some complex parts of life.

"I don't know what else to call it other than creationism," said Michael Zimmerman, a critic and dean at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

Meyer, however, says he's a scientist, who starts with scientific evidence, not the Bible. His goal — a big one — is to change the very definition of science so that it doesn't rule out the possibility that an intelligent designer is actively at work.

"Science should be open to whatever cause ... can best explain the data," Meyer says.

That would be a major change for science, which limits itself to the natural world. Scott says it would be a "science stopper."

"Once you allow yourself to say God did it, you stop looking for naturalistic explanations. If you stop looking, you won't find them," she says.

Scott says science isn't an atheistic world view. In science, she says, "It is equally inappropriate to say God did it, or God had nothing to do with it."

The institute's call to "teach the controversy" meets strong resistance.

"There's no controversy about whether living things have common ancestors," Scott said. "There's no controversy about whether natural selection is very important in creating the variety of organisms we have today."

While the institute touts its list of 370 scientists who've signed a statement saying they have some doubts about Darwin's theory of natural selection, Scott's organization, in a parody of that effort, has a list of 500 names limited to scientists named Steve or Stephanie, in honor of the late Stephen Jay Gould, a well-known biologist who once wrote that evolution is "one of the best documented, most compelling and exciting concepts in all of science."

Public opinion is mixed. Many Christian denominations, including Catholics, see no contradiction between evolution and their faith, but a Gallup Poll last November found that only about a third of the respondents think Darwin's theory of evolution is well supported by scientific evidence.

Meyer hopes the Kansas Board of Education will invite the center to speak at its hearings in May. Speakers will be asked to address the issue the center wants to highlight: whether Kansas' science curriculum helps students understand debate over controversial topics such as evolution.

Kansas Citizens for Science, however, has urged a boycott of the hearings, saying the proposals have been "rejected by the science community at large."

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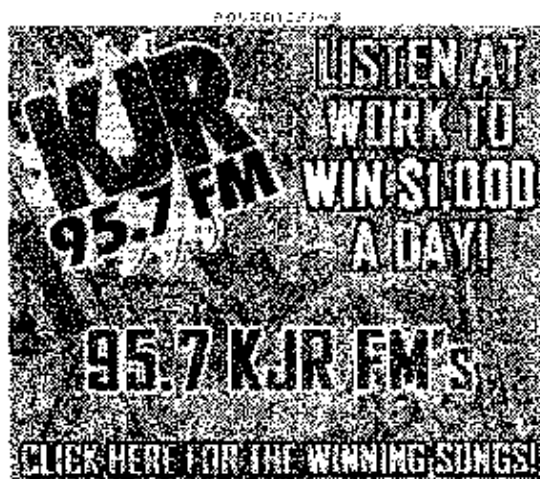
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